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ABSTRACT

In a study of student adjustment to university life, excerpts are presented of interviews with 18 mature age unmatriculated women who returned to formal education at the University of New South Wales in 1975. The women were aged between 25 and over 40, half had children, and they were generally middle class. They were not selected by a random process. The responses of the women are divided into four broad sections: initial responses to the university experience, adjustments in home life, reasons for attending the university, and expectations versus the reality. It is concluded that: (1) more effort is needed to consider ways of opening up the opportunity for university education to less privileged groups; (2) the structure and the modes of assessment of some courses may not be suited to present student needs; and (3) those who are given access to higher education have a social responsibility to the community at large. (PHR)

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WOMEN RETURN TO STUDY: THE EXPERIENCE OF A GROUP OF MATURE AGE UNMATRICULATED STUDENTS ADMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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October, 1977

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cases as employees as well) can be met, but also that they should organise themselves mentally to undertake the rigours of a directed intellectual activity. To juggle with these different aspects of themselves, clearly requires a high degree of motivation and determination.

Ms. Nigel, a woman with five young children had this to say in her first interview:

> I will be happy to give up all my other interests because I have wanted to have tertiary education for so long. Also I had already been preparing for doing the School Certificate so I had to get the house and children organised so that I wouldn't have to spend much time on this. My uni. work is my first priority.

Undoubtedly, Ms. Nigel, is a woman of energy; commenting on her new life she had this to say:

> I am finding that my interests have been narrowed this year since I have come to the uni. I was reading three newspapers a day which I am not any more. In the weeks that I have to hand in an essay then that week I have read nothing but textbooks. I was getting six books a week out of the library before I came here, on general topics, just topics that interested me. I haven't used my library card since I started uni., except for reference work to do with uni., so it has cut down my field a lot. It does worry me a bit, but I think it all goes back to trying to have a part-time job as well. I think if I quit attempting that I will be right.

Asked how she managed to study with five young children she said:

> I've found that with small children at home it is better to go and work in the local library than to go home. It's the only way to get any work done without interruption. My husband has gone back to tech. every night of the week and it is becoming quite a problem now, he feels that he needs more qualification for the job he wants to do, so he has gone back to tech., my job will probably have to go. I've got a daughter twelve and a half and the youngest is five so she collects the five year old from school and brings him home and makes sure that everyone else is in the house, she also has phone numbers to call if she has a problem so I don't have to worry that much. I've never had help from relatives or anything so she is fairly self-reliant. I'm a little bit worried that I'm not giving the five year old enough attention but I'm not worried leaving them alone. I do get conscience-stricken occasionally about the amount of attention that the children are getting. There are five of them and they have each other for company. I'm looking at it in a biased way because I had such a hell of a childhood and they are getting it so easy compared to me that this eases my conscience a lot. I realise that this is not the right way to look at it, but it does help.

INTRODUCTION

The opportunity to participate in degree courses without first fulfilling the usual requirements for university entrance has always been there for those who were determined enough to search around for openings. It was perhaps the Open University in Britain, however, which first acted as a catalyst drawing attention to the need of bringing such opportunities more out into the open: and since the late 1960's, when the Open University was launched, schemes to enable mature age unmatriculated students to enter universities have been given favour by universities in Britain, for example, and, more recently, in Australia. With the increase for some in the hours for leisure the idea of recurrent education has become popular, and for women especially the decrease in the size of families - to mention the most vital change which has affected their lives - has enabled them to seek full time occupation, whether it be as an employee or as a student, at a stage when they are still comparatively young and ready to explore pastures new.

In 1974 the Women's Collective at the University of New South Wales petitioned the Professorial Board to consider enabling mature age women, who had not matriculated, to enter the University as undergraduates. This petition was accepted by the Board and in 1975, International Women's Year, sixty-three mature age unmatriculated students, forty-eight of whom were women, were admitted to the University.

The University's Tertiary Education Research Centre undertook the task of designing an appropriate selection procedure and initiated studies of the characteristics, adjustment problems and academic performance of this special entry group and those of subsequent years. The results of several of these studies have already been reported[1] and may be compared with similar work in Britain[2]. During 1975 twenty-five students in the first intake were interviewed several times and the entire group was also asked to complete questionnaires.

In this paper I propose to draw together a series of responses which were elicited during these interviews in order to depict the situation of some of the women who have taken up this opportunity to continue their formal education. The aim is to give a qualitative account of the experience of these women by recounting in their own words the situation in which they found themselves at the onset of their university career. The group of eighteen women on whom this account is based were not, it is necessary to point out, selected in accord with any random sampling procedures. They

constitute a self-selected group insofar as they were the women who volunteered to assist in T.E.R.C.'s researches. Therefore there is no suggestion that the responses which have been selected to illustrate the situation of this particular group are necessarily representative of the group of mature age female students as a whole.

Given this point, let us consider, before I proceed any further, whether or not it is feasible to make any generalisations about those eighteen women. Do they in any way constitute a group about whom generalisations can be made or are they merely a somewhat disparate collection of individuals? It has been pointed out that this group of self-selected women cannot ncesssarily be taken as representative of the total intake of mature age female students, but do they share any characteristics as a group about which generalisations could be made which would have at least some relevance to mature age unmatriculated female students as a whole?

I have chosen in this paper to speak only of the women amongst the mature age student intake in 1975, although there were fifteen men in their midst. For once, in this university intake, the women were in the majority. That, in itself, is of significance: the lives of these women have been changed as a result of the political action taken by the Women's Collective at the University, and it is from this context that this paper draws its theme.

The second generalisation that can be made about these eighteen women, is that, like the intake as a whole, although they vary in age between their mid-twenties and forty or over,[3] they are all quite considerably older than the average student. All but three of the women in the group have experienced marriage; nine of the women have children who are still in their care; and all the women have been in paid employment.[4]

The third generalisation that can be made about these eighteen women is that loosely they can all be described as 'middle-class'. I say "loosely" because this description is based solely on the observation that neither they nor their husbands have latterly been employed in manual or unskilled non-manual jobs.[5] No questions specifically seeking to discover the class position of the women were asked during the interviews, and I will return to this point in the conclusion of this paper.

By way of introduction, then, I wish to point out that as the experiences of the women are depicted through their own words these three general characteristics, which they all share, should be borne in mind. One further characteristic which members of the group have in common is the obvious

one that they have come together at a particular point in time, and at a particular place, in response to an advertisement that was placed in the newspapers in December 1974 calling for unmatriculated applicants for degree courses at the University. It is this shared characteristic which has constituted these women into a group.

In order to present the situation of these eighteen women, as they themselves have depicted it in their own words, the following questions, which are composites of the sorts of questions which they were asked during their interviews, have been put to the material. These are:

1) What was their initial response to the University and to the work which they were required to do for their course?
2) What adjustments did they have to make in order to fit their studies into their domestic routines and did they have any difficulties in making these adjustments?
3) What sorts of motivation encouraged them to take up this opportunity to become mature age students?
4) Were any criticisms made of the functioning of the University as a whole, and in particular, of the parts played by the staff, and of the forms of assessment carried out in the different Departments?
5) At the end of the first year were there any expressions of disappointment with the University in general and with their own courses?

The purpose of this exercise is to add to our understanding and awareness of what constitutes the position of mature age female students. In addition, some of the more general implications of the admission scheme will be touched on in the conclusion of this paper.

SECTION I: INITIAL RESPONSES TO THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

Most of what follows is a selection of quotations from what the women said about their own experiences at the University during International Women's Year. It is this political context of their situation which has been taken as a theme for this paper: implicit in the selection which I have made is that women are in a relatively deprived position in relation to their access to institutions of higher learning, and that these women who have availed themselves of this unusual opportunity have made a bid for the extension of their own freedom. Let us take the model of a court of law and allow the women themselves to act as witnesses in defence of their own case. In order to conceal the identity of the respondents fictitious names have been used throughout the paper.

Ms. Price, a woman in her early forties with three young children and an older daughter who is a student, is the first to speak:

> I'm enjoying it. I'm thrilled to be here and I'm grateful that everyone has got me here....The work has not been as formidable as I really thought, although stats at first gave me the heebie jeebies.... Anyhow, I feel like an alcoholic. I'm taking every day as it comes. I love it....I've never enjoyed myself so much at anything.

Ms. Lewis, a woman who first arrived in Australia from Italy when she was twelve years old and who had always wanted to go to university, chose to study in her first year History, Spanish and Drama:

> They are all terribly interesting. History especially, has opened up a completely new world....studying I find a relaxation....to me it has been one of the most happy four weeks giving me a chance to learn all the things I wanted to learn.

Ms. Adam, who had previously been working as a full-time housewife and mother said:

> I am so thrilled to have got here. It's enormously stimulating, I feel a different person....I think it's just learning again - at last I feel I'm doing something now, whereas at home I felt a bit like a cabbage.

Ms. Mack, a married woman who had previously worked as a secretary, reported:

> I feel I've been able to cope with things so far. I haven't fallen behind in the work I was doing. I've really enjoyed it....I just enjoy the lectures and I enjoy the readings and I enjoy going to the

library, discovering the library. I've really found it's a great big beautiful world that's opened up.

Speaking of opening up into new worlds Ms. Lewis said:

I had no idea of Indian history or China or Islam....the religious influence. I'm a Roman Catholic - I had no idea how religion influenced other people. To me, suddenly India has just become a relevant part of the world and I can look at the Indians, even the political situation, and the news that comes from India, from a different point of view.

In tribute to the younger students Ms. Mack said:

What has been a very pleasant experience has been the way the young students have accepted me in tutorials. Yes, I think they've been absolutely marvellous. They've sought me out, they've talked to me....They've really treated me as if I was just one of them. They're all pleased, they're not resentful....I've had no problems at all. They've been tremendous.

Ms. Bruce, a married woman, was eloquent:

At the beginning I thought I just won't do anything else at all. But things come up and I think "Well, I have to do that"....I'm very much more content now because all the time I'm so very busy.... my time is valuable now and that makes me feel good, not consciously, but unconsciously, I feel content, whereas having times before when I thought "What will I do today?" is very uncomfortable.

Thus, in reply to my first question: "What was their initial response to the University and to the work they were required to do for their courses?" - these witnesses expressed a sense of release at the new stimulus which had been injected into their lives. However, at the same time, the women also had things to say about the difficulties which they faced initially. Ms. Mack, who so enthusiastically said that "a great big, beautiful world" had opened up to her admitted:

I was terrified when I first came and I didn't think I'd be able to understand the lectures and things, I was quite frightened. I've had a paper back from each of the Schools and since then I've felt really great - I got a seven out of ten and fifteen out of twenty in Political Science, and a fourteen out of twenty in Sociology. And then I have other moments of despair and think it was all fluke.

Ms. Riall, a married woman with a young child, said that she was finding the new experience "interesting and exciting" but she was worried:

> I have the 'flu. I also have a four year old baby and I'm worried about the amount of study I am going to have to put in. How will I get the work done?

Ms. Short also admitted during the first interview that she felt:

> ...pretty terrible. I was enjoying everything very much but all of a sudden I had to sit down and read Plato for two weekends, and then if I could have done this and related it to the question.... but I got bogged down. I couldn't relate it to the question. I went to see the tutor and then after I left him I came away thinking 'now I know what I'm going to do'. But then, when I got back, I didn't seem to be any further advanced. What I eventually did do, after the end of Easter weekend, I sat down and started the essay by saying I could not relate to the question but went on to give my own impressions of his utopia and where I thought it might fall down.

A fellow student, Ms. Brown, expressed her dismay at all the handouts she had received in Psychology: "I was all in a state of panic....the bombardment you get is frightening." Speaking of the amount of ground she was required to cover she said:

> What's frustrating is that....you're just really brushing the surface with all these subjects....You see so many things you'd really love to get involved in and you just don't have time. Very frustrating.

Ms. Matthew made a similar point:

> If I get through the next few weeks I will be all right. No problem writing - I have had experience. I feel what they expect you to do is unrealistic. I will be forced to cut it down. It is good stuff and interesting, but some of it I will have to skim through. I am a slow reader I think, I read for comprehension, I find it hard to skim.

Ms. View agreed with this: "The work to keep up with what's expected in all subjects is impossible....I have to work on one subject at a time full-time."

Ms. Johns, who had also worked as a secretary before, compared herself with the younger students:

I am more serious about it. If I don't do well this year I'll be shattered, I really will. This is my last chance. My disadvantage is that I haven't just come from school: I have to get used to study again.

Ms. Adam, who had said that she felt "like a cabbage" at home, stated:

I desperately want to get through if I can....If I don't do it now, I am never going to do it... I am finding it difficult, not because I don't understand it, but because I don't think the right way at this stage. I think you have to think in a certain manner....I just don't think properly....obviously my brain's got lazy over the last few years and I'm having difficulty channelling myself, and organizing myself - but it's coming.

One woman remarked on the 'fanatical pace' at which she had approached her studies and Ms. Brown, who had been concerned about the number of handouts, said:

I think to myself: "I've gotta read that book, I've gotta read that book, I've gotta read that book", and I'm messing around at the moment in my approach to it. I haven't worked out which way to do what.

Like several other women, Ms. Brown described her lack of confidence:

I'm not very good at talking. I'm terribly frightened of raising my voice. I am much better, I can talk to one person or two but give me ten people and I panic.

Ms. Lewis, who has four sons, two of whom are nearly adults, said:

I find it difficult to criticise when I haven't done as much research as they have done. How can you be critical and original in that case? Had I done my own research....I don't feel so strong in my own judgment. I still have the school-girl look at authority: anyone who writes a book or sits behind a desk must know more than I do. I never had it [self confidence]. I could never criticise a teacher whilst learning something from him. I'll have to learn to get over it. I'll try and do that from now on.

Like many of the others in this group she found it difficult at first to know what was expected of her: "[I have] no idea of the standards required....I'm not going to worry at the moment I'm going to do as much as I can as well as I can."

Ms. Neil had this to say:

I think the first couple of weeks were pretty traumatic because I think more than anything I found it really hard to get into a study routine, and that's worried me....I read countless books about it....

and I'm still trying to do that, but I'm finding it rather difficult and I've found it quite hard to keep up with the work because I find that if I've got to do essays and reading for that then I fall behind on reading up on the lectures....so I've probably fallen behind to some extent in keeping up-to-date with the lecture work. But until I can get myself better organised I can't see any way around it.

Ms. Neil, like Ms. Adam, who had expressed the need to develop 'the right way of thinking' was finding it hard at first to develop her analytic powers:

The tutors stress how you're supposed to evaluate the underlying points or influences and I've never done this....It comes back to evaluating everything you read and all that sort of stuff. I've just got to learn to do it, but I don't think I do it yet.

She performed well in her first year but at her first interview she said:

I'm not confident. I don't think I could try any harder than I am now....but I'm not confident, though probably I'm more confident than I was. I think I would just freak out if I failed anything - I just could'nt cope.

Ms. Mack said that she went to lectures even if they did not appear to be very useful:

I'd still go because I think you are getting rather blasé if you think you are not getting anything out of lectures. Somebody is talking to me who knows a lot more about it than I do. History is good because I realised I could understand what people were talking about - it restored my faith that I could comprehend. It was History that [has] kept me here. I gauged myself by my comprehension of [that].

Ms. Matthew said that in the first week she had felt exhausted:

I am putting in a lot of time already. I work in a job Thursday night and Friday all day, and all the rest of the time I spend studying. I must put the time in now and get things sorted out. I have always studied something during nights although I begrudge [any] time spent away from study now.

Ms. Adam commented:

In my day girls were dumb [and that] makes me a little scared about my unpreparedness....If I go at the pace I'm going now I feel as though I could probably scrape through....I seem to be keeping up more or less reasonably well.

Like some of the others she felt unclear about what was required of her:

> I am working more systematically now. I'm working much better now, in the beginning I was running around like a chock with its head off. I hope that if I keep working like I am at present I will get a pass at least. I am just playing it by ear. I've got a psych. exam in June and I think the results will show me a lot more. I've got a couple of essays back but I'm not familiar with the marking system - I'm getting about 70 to 75%. I'm not sure how that compares, although it seems reasonable compared to other students. My problem in the beginning was that I was comparing the mark with the high school marking system [where] you're expected to get at least 85% or more. I'm not really happy with the work that I am handing in. When I hand in an essay I always feel that it could be better. I find the technique of writing hard.

Ms. Brown, in her first interview, said that she felt harrassed:

> It's all a rush. I can do the work, if I can get on my feet. My lack of time for university work makes me nervous. If I had time - no immediate pressing demands - I could sit down and organise myself.

She was also feeling quite isolated at first and pointed out that this was a particular problem for the mature age students, whereas students who were straight from school have many of their school friends at the University.

Several of the group expressed the timidity and lack of self-assurance which they had felt when they had first arrived at the University and Ms. Johns seemed to echo the situation of many of her fellow mature age students when she said that her confidence 'keeps fluctuating between extremes'.

To draw together, then, the initial responses which this group of women expressed during their first few weeks at the University, there is no doubt that although several of them expressed excitement at the opportunity which had been given to them, the demands of their work schedule were causing a fair amount of strain. The women expressed enthusiasm for the fact that their horizons had opened up and for the fact that they had now the opportunity to study full time, but at the same time they all expressed feelings of harrassment and varying degrees of lack of confidence in the face of the task which they had set themselves. There seem to be two main reasons for the initial difficulties which they experienced: firstly, they were unsure of their ability to do the work adequately and this was mainly to do with the fact that they did not know what was expected of them and with their difficulties in gearing their minds to an analytical approach; secondly, the women experienced doubts as to whether they were going to be able to organise themselves sufficiently so as to cope with all the demands which were now being made on their time. These women were, on the whole, intent on being

ideal students: they were determined to keep up both with the preparation for tutorials and with their assignments and, as one woman pointed out, essay writing took up an enormous amount of time, especially since, unlike the younger students who had just come from school, to many of them it was a task with which they were not familiar:

> If I work hard I can keep up. Perhaps I am developing a better way of studying. When I write essays I am very laborious and I make lots of drafts. I'm sure other people don't because the day before [an essay is due] I might be talking to somebody and they will say that they are just going off to the library to write the essay; it's very disheartening when I realise how much work I have put into it.

The women were extremely anxious to succeed in their courses and to prove to themselves that they were capable of doing the work. More than one of them was proceeding at what was described as a "fanatical pace". Ms. Price mentioned that she had experienced at first "the heebie jeebies" and it was she who later pointed out that she "nearly had a stroke" when she received her first mark which proved to be a dissappointment to her. Ms. Neil said that she would "freak out" if she failed since this was her only chance; and Ms. Adam admitted that initially she had felt like "a chook running round with its head off".

In their book on adult students Hopper and Osborn have this to say about the impediments to women entering formal adult education schemes:

> ....the typical life of a housewife or female worker [does not] facilitate the desire and ability to return to formal education. Unskilled manual work, routine clerical tasks and domestic duties do not stimulate the powers of concentration, 'constructive thought' and the ability to think abstractly. To the contrary, most housewives have lost the confidence necessary to pursue any personal goal outside those which derive from their immediate worlds of family, friends and domestic affairs.[6]

It would be mistaken, however, and to compound the injustice of belittling the tasks which are normally assigned to women, to suggest that the previous experience of these women - either as full-time housewives and mothers or as nurses or secretaries - has not in any way profitted them. To handle the challenges of their new university career and to organise their time so that they could meet all their obligations, was no easy task facing this group of women, and to explore their negotiation of these varying demands I will consider now their responses which apply to the question:

"What adjustments did these women have to make in order to fit their studies into their domestic routines and did they have any difficulties in making these adjustments?"

SECTION II: ADJUSTMENTS IN HOME LIFE

Out of the group of eighteen women on whom we are focusing nine have a young family to look after in addition to their university studies. These women manage the different aspects of their lives only by working each day to a tight schedule. Ms. Price, a woman in her early forties with three young children and an older daughter who was a student complained about the fact that she had to waste forty minutes tracing a book which she had placed on order at the library:

> At this point in my life I have to run my life extremely tightly and efficiently, and I'm used to working to a pretty efficient kind of system so that I can achieve all that I do achieve, and I've always done this by going to work, running a home....and to me every minute is terribly precious.

Like the other mature age female students with a family she attended university only within the school hours as far as possible, and at the outset of her university career she said: "I have got it all sorted out....but this couldn't happen if I didn't have a husband co-operating." Her arrangement was to collect her children three days a week from school: "It is important to me in my personal relationship with the children that I am there. I feel that this is the way I want to do it."

On Wednesdays it was her practise to pick them up and then they all set off together to do the family shopping, and on Wednesday night she would prepare for her family "something that doesn't take long to cook". On Saturday night it was her routine, she said, to do the ironing in front of the television: "That's my night off....we eat in a restaurant on Saturday night."

On Sundays her husband would take the children off for the day to where he was building a boat and she commented: "He's being fabulous about them."

Her aim was to try:

> ...to do three hours a day of reading or work. I feel if I do that consistently it is not overtaxing me, I can manage it. I don't have that kind of divided loyalty thing that I used to first have. When I was young working with a young child I used to work twice as hard at the office and twice as hard at home

because I had almost a guilt thing....that I had to show my domestic responsibilties weren't interfering with my office, and I had to do the same thing at home....and I used to knock myself out.

This is a bind, which, no doubt many working wives and mothers experience, and the challenge to those women who had young children was to find, during their first year at university, a reasonable balance between their family commitments and their own commitment to their studies. Ms. Lewis described her situation and her attitude to it in these words:

I had to do something because when [my husband] is home he is so depleted he has no time for any other interests, for a social life. He wants to come home and rest - for me, it was an upsetting situation. I was waiting for him to come home for someone to talk to....Time came when I thought I would be a bit selfish and do something that is just for me, something I want to do, which would not interfere with the family life....I needed to do something to keep my marriage going. A frustrated wife like me would have been a very poor wife. I had to do something.

Her new programme, Ms. Lewis insisted: "...[has] concentrated my patterns of living. I can now cope with housework more efficiently, in less time than I could before."

Her practice was to get up in the middle of the night if she felt wakeful and work for an hour or two. She was determined, she pointed out:

...to give the children time they need....I still pack them lunch in the morning...and if they want a bedtime story I will read to them even if I would prefer to read Spanish history....I don't want them to feel neglected now Mum is doing her own thing.... The children are not suffering, my husband may be suffering a little bit, but I'm not too sorry cos he can look after himself.

It would be a misrepresentation, however, to suggest that Ms. Lewis consciously resented the responsibilities she had taken on in her family life (she has four sons) for she declared explicitly: "I know that I'm a woman with a family and I have got to do two jobs. I'm prepared for that." Her family, she pointed out, did not give her much time to study, although they do, she insisted:

...co-operate by cleaning the table (they won't wash up) and making their own beds, if they remember. And my husband will try and pick up a few things from the floor and say "If you're stuck ring me up at the office." But I don't get much help - no. I don't think that I could even expect my husband to take up work in the house. I feel it is degrading for a man to be seen with an apron in the kitchen.

In addition to her husband and four children, at the beginning of her course Ms. Lewis was also taking care of a bed-ridden mother: "I am so busy tearing from university to home, to my mother's home, I haven't had time to think."

At the time of her second interview Ms. Lewis said:

> At the moment I have to rely on my physical strength. I cannot do more than I'm physically able to because I'm afraid of having a physical breakdown and spoiling the whole thing in the end....If something is required by the family that has to come first, otherwise I just try to do my best...[I have] just eked out every moment I could for me. Sometimes I've asked for some help - would they please leave me alone for a few hours or a day....It's trying to make everybody happy...if I get sick or overworked - strain myself. I can't think and I'm very nervous.

Despite the difficulties that she faced Ms. Lewis managed to maintain a high level of achievement (she was awarded two credits and a pass at the end of her first year) and she had this to say about her success:

> My pass is very important, not only to me, but also to my husband. [He] had been thinking "She won't make it anyway"... but [when] he realised my efforts were successful - he is respecting my position more and takes it more seriously. The children - too my son appreciates the fact that I could cope with the course. They get themselves a feeling of security and achievement. It's not nice to have a failure in the family. The little ones say "Mummy, do you have to go to university?" I try to be with them as much as I can before and after school. [I try to] never make them feel that my books are an obstacle between me and them....I don't want to create that psychological dislike for my studies. The family is probably happier now than it was originally. I have a woman [to help with the housework] four days a week, so I can concentrate more on myself and the children. I feel much more relaxed in that respect. I feel like a queen at the moment. I hope it's going to last....[I was] so bored with housework and so desperately in need of some interest that it has been a tremendous booster.

Ms. Adam, the woman who admitted that she had been feeling like a cabbage at home, reported: "[I have] a much more regimented day, I have to be at home at a certain time for the children, therefore I have to organise the day much more." Her husband, she said, was: "Very keen for me to do it."

Organisation is obviously crucial to those women who have launched into university studies whilst they still have heavy family commitments. For what is required of them is not only that they organise their days so that all the different demands of their roles as wife and mother (and in some

Asked what reaction her friends had to her new programme Ms. Nigel declared: "The only feedback that I am getting from acquaintances is that I'm mad." Then she added:

> I think the fact that I am at uni. is a status symbol to the kids, why I don't know. I think that they are better off because I was very frustrated at home, and I'm not getting on their backs so much about little things.

Ms. Mack, a married woman without children, was asked if it had been necessary for her to make many adjustments to her home life:

> Yes. People blend in pretty well. My husband's interested in what I'm doing. He's very supportive. And he also works long hours - he's a professional man himself.

She explained that it was her custom to work in the evening until her husband came home from work, when they ate their evening meal together: But, she said:

> I never work afterwards. Mainly because my husband's so good. I just don't like to infringe on that time. I guess it's changed the conversation in the house - my husband never gets a chance to talk about the hospital now - he gets the work of the University.

The sorts of adjustment which these women have had to make in their private lives to include the hours of study which are required if they are to succeed in their university careers will, no doubt, affect the dynamics of their relationship with their husbands. Several women pointed out that without their husband's support they could not manage to fulfil their obligations both to themselves and to their families. Ms. Neil, a woman who was married but without children, had this to say about her husband's support:

> Dave's so easy going. He's sort of now starting to do the cooking and he offers to do the ironing and make his lunch and all those sorts of things that were just unheard of before. But he's really trying to push me as hard as he can because he's so wrapped in the whole idea, so that's really good. I've got other friends here who have completely the opposite arrangement.

Ms. Lewis (who had commented: "I feel it is degrading for a man to be seen with an apron in the kitchen") had this to say in a conversation we had in her third year of studies:

> I feel that my husband - like many other men - [they] feel threatened by the strengthening of their wives' or their female

> companions' independent outlook and position... which I think, in that field, perhaps, is where the major change has to come....It requires a lot of very very subtle work and perhaps a lot of jolts from the more, you know, active females.

Several of the women pointed out that their settled situation in a family enabled them to pay fuller attention to their studies. Ms. Price commented:

> I've solved so many of my problems and I am now able to sit down and enjoy an education - unlike [the younger] students - it has taken me twenty years to sort [things] out. [Now] I come up strong against things.

On the other hand, since she all too often felt the pressures on her time, Ms. Price added:

> I worry about it [my studies] much more than the younger students. I always have essays done a fair way ahead because I'm frightened that if I don't somebody will get chicken-pox [or something].

Ms. Short, a woman in her forties, also compared her position with that of the younger students:

> I can think of the disadvantages I have as compared to the students straight from school, like I must write a letter to my daughter, I must contact my mother fairly regularly or she gets upset.

Ms. Neil also compared her position with that of the younger students and commented favourably on the support she was getting from her husband and her other companions:

> [the problem with the study routine is that] I think it's basically that I've lost the method of being able to discipline myself and concentrate, to sit down and be able to do something quickly and get straight to the point and not spend a lot of time messing around, whereas kids who've been at school for five years, they're probably into that routine already and it's much easier for them. But I'm very lucky with Dave: he's been a student for years and years. He helps me a lot, in building up my morale more than anything. He helps me in practical ways, telling me what to do and how to go about it. So I think I'm very lucky there. [The house I live in] is really a good environment because there's five of us there and we're all students. My husband's doing his Ph.D...and another one's doing it. So it's really good to be in that sort of atmosphere, because I think this partly stimulated me in the first place in thinking about going to university...being around other people who can talk to you about it and who are in the same situation makes it so much easier, so this way of living is ideal for me at the moment

Asked specifically how she compared herself to the younger students Ms. Neil noted:

> I think maybe now that they've got more advantages, purely because I found it so hard to concentrate and study and that sort of thing, and I think they're so lucky that they've got all that worked out for themselves.

Asked whether she felt different from the younger students Ms. Neil commented:

> A little bit...it's not that marked though....I find myself being amused quite often by their stories about the way they live and I'm quite grateful that I am so staid and settled and everything's so easy when I hear about some of their hairy relationships. Because they must be so up and down all the time, whereas for me life is very stable....I couldn't bear to be living some of their existences.

Ms. Neil did mention, however, that some changes had occurred in her relationship as a result of her new commitments:

> I don't get nearly as much time to talk to Dave as I used to anyway...but he's sympathetic to that. So probably my married life has changed to some extent...[also] I find that whenever I'm writing an essay I get very aggressive and pretty terrible to live with.

Ms. Riall, a married woman, who said that she had previously been "involved a great deal in political interest groups", noted:

> [it] will be very difficult to settle down to study and to organise my time. I will have to make great changes to my routine but I intend to put my uni. work first.

Comparing herself to the younger students she said:

> I think I have advantages because of experience and being able to say what I think, but I think the kids straight out of school have many more techniques of learning and organising and writing which I will have to acquire. They are very competent, I need confidence.

Most of the women in the group commented that they had given up much of their social life to make room for their hours of study. Ms. Macintyre, who was bringing up a young son with the help of her grand-parents said: "...it [the university work] really is most of my living schedule. That's why I am here." And Ms. View, commenting on the adjustments she was making in her new life, said: "I don't have much social life compared with

previously. [And] I'm not cleaning windows and things like that."

Some of the women, of course, were finding it harder than others to adjust their schedules to meet the demands of their university work. Ms. Arthur, who had previously worked as a nurse and who had three small children, said confidently: "[I'm] well organised. I've sandwiched everything into three days. My friends are helping out."

But Ms. Bright, who has one child, spoke with less confidence towards the end of her first year: "I was not really capable of organising myself this year - people had to steer me quite often. I think they thought I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown or something."

One or two of the women mentioned the fact that there was a danger in their becoming a prey to guilt if it was suggested to them by others that they were neglecting their family responsibilities.

Ms. Macintyre, who was dependent on her grandparents for their assistance in caring for her son, expressed some difficulty:

> [They're] always saying things like "John's better with us... he doesn't play up with us. You don't take him out enough. He doesn't see enough of you" -- and all this sort of thing - instilling these guilt feelings in you all the time that you're neglecting your child. Which I don't think I am. You know, I take him to school every morning. And I probably see him more than if I was working.... all the holidays... but they're always sort of..... he's a very strong-willed little child.... which makes it even worse.

Ms. Price, who was quoted earlier saying that she had, when younger, strained herself to ensure that she neither neglected her family nor her job, commented: "I'm not finding any guilt to be here. My mother would like me to be guilty - she's quite cross that I'm no longer available to her".

Apart from these subtle difficulties of adjustment, of finding the self-assurance to defend the amount of absorption in study which is required of the women, several of them were experiencing some financial difficulties. Ms. Nigel, the mother of five said: "My main worry at the moment is the financial one if I give up my job, and how I will pay the fees for next year".

However, it would be incorrect to give undue emphasis to this constraint in the group of mature age students' lives: for though several of them had chosen to give up reasonably well-paid jobs to study at the university, the

overall impression of the group, as I have mentioned earlier, is that they are by no means impoverished.

To sum up this section then: it is clear that in their first year at university, this group of women made considerable efforts to fulfil all their various obligations. As a final example of their zealous approach to their studies let me quote Ms. Bruce:

> I put in everything I can. Nine till five-thirty everyday; everyday I've got free and I put that in. And then after that I have my child until she goes to bed. I can't do anything until she goes to bed. After she goes to bed I work again and work till about midnight, it's really dumb and really stupid.....[because] I'm too tired, I'm really tired. I also try to work on Saturdays and Sundays if my husband's home. If he's not then I can't because I have to mind the kid. And he's very rarely home.

Some of the women were getting more help and support from their husbands than others.

The women also again expressed a certain lack of confidence but that, it seems, has been fully compensated for by their determination. Some of the women expressed feelings of guilt, or at least of anxiety, about what they thought (or others thought) might constitute a neglect of their families, but the prevailing mood during their first year, was well exemplified by the mother of five who remained defiantly determined despite the fact that, as she pointed out, all her acquaintances thought her mad. Although sadly, Ms. Nigel was not able to continue throughout the degree programme, we have on record that on the whole these students were successful in making the necessary adjustments to accommodate to their new study routines and their level of achievement has remained consistently well above the average. One of them commented on this: "It makes sense that mature age students should do better because they know what they're here for"

What are they at university for? What sort of motivation encouraged this group of women to take up this opportunity?

Some answers to these questions are presented in the next section.

SECTION III: WHY GO TO UNIVERSITY?

Ms. Johns, a married women without children who had previously worked as a secretary, had this to say concerning her motives for coming to the university:

> I always regretted not studying - my sister did absolutely brilliantly - high distinctions and everything - and I couldn't - mostly through

> financial reasons. I had a scholarship which I wasn't able to use, which I resented a little bit. When I was married my husband had rheumatic fever so I had to support him. Then I became interested in just getting money - [we have] a house in Mosman and everything we need materially....[But now] I'm not really interested in being a secretary any more... I'm earning well, but it's all pretty dead end.

It was her husband who saw the advertisement for the scheme and he persuaded her to apply: "I couldn't believe it when I was admitted" she said.

Ms. Adam, who had previously been working as a housewife and mother, said that she too had "always wanted" to do university studies. It was Ms. Adam who had said that she had been feeling 'a bit of a cabbage' at home and here are her stated reasons for applying to the University:

> I don't want to be at home when the children are older - I don't like being at home - and I thought; well, acccounting is something I have always wanted to do - and I think you should do the things you want to do.

Ms. Bright is a divorced woman living with her twenty-year old daughter, who is also a student. When in her mid-thirties, she had applied to train as a social worker. At the time, however, her children were still young and she was in the midst of a "difficult marriage" so she did not pursue her application. "But", she explained, "It has been niggling at me ever since, and I've done many of the WEA courses, and I like learning."

She looked forward, she said, to being "a more educated person" as a result of her efforts at the University:

> I've learnt an awful lot already...you see it's always been a resentment of mine that my family were quite well off and they didn't educate me... I was only to get married... I've read all my life and now I have a chance to do programmed reading.

Ms. Lewis, who had previously worked as a housewife and a mother to four sons, and occasionally for such causes as 'Meals on Wheels,' has already been quoted at length. She was bored with housework and 'desperately in need of some interest': It was to alleviate her frustration, as she explicitly stated, that she came to the university. Ms. Lewis had been impelled to interrupt her high school studies when her family left Italy to come to Australia. The family had been short of money and she had been "sent to work". She worked as a housekeeper, then in a factory, and subsequently for many years as a bilingual secretary, in a position which was well paid, but 'I loathed it' Ms. Lewis affirmed.

During her first year of studies at the University of N.S.W. Ms. Lewis was thinking that she might eventually work, if she could, with migrants. In any event she hoped that her university studies would ".... probably help me into a position where I'm a bit more influential." Definitely Ms. Lewis was thrilled with the opportunity she had been given to come to the university 'in my case, whether it was just sheer luck or a miracle from heaven, the fact that I was given the opportunity has been to me a life-saver in many respects.'

Ms. Macintyre, who was bringing up her young son with the help of her grand-parents, and who had previously worked in a variety of jobs including public relations and script-writing for television, said that she too had thought for years about doing a university course:

> .... ever since I left school. When I left school I was pregnant. [I] got married and settled down at eighteen with a family and all that garbage and that wiped out all ideas of higher education.

The jobs she had done since she and her husband had separated were, she felt, "dreary" but "superficially glamorous" What she wanted out of university was to broaden her experience and knowledge and "....[to gain] a book education - a knowledge of facts and figures." She expected, she said, to learn from being in a new environment, from being amongst young people, and amongst academics: "[from] the basic differences [in the] social situation that you are into you just learn different ideas and feelings about things."

Ms. Price had always worked hard to maintain both her job and her family and claimed that she had "never had a dull job." She was not at the university as a:

> .... job orientation thing. [It's part of] an ongoing process. I'm only continuing [my education] but in a very specific field. I cannot pinpoint anytime in my life, since I first went to school, that my education process has stopped. I've consciously gone and done things. Surely the real purpose of education is a background for living?
>
> I am here at the taxpayer's expense - I am conscious of this - and I would like to think that I will do something useful back in the community when it's over. I believe in productivity in whatever area you are in. I feel I have a responsibility to use this [opportunity] in whatever way I can, if, at the end of the experience, I ever get through.

Ms. Price had worked previously as a nurse, as an industrial officer for the Nurse's Association, as a public relations officer and as a journalist. She had this to say about the opportunity she had been given to come to the university

> Everything that I have ever wanted to do in my life I have achieved - almost never at the time that I wanted to do it - and almost everything

> that I have achieved has turned up unexpectedly and I have seized the chance. That sounds quite extraordinary but that is how life has been for me.

Ms. Neil who was living in a household of mature students, including her husband who was completing his PhD., said that her father had wanted her to do mathetmatics: "I failed miserably. When I left school I had no motivation to go to university; now I want to do it more than anything else."

Ms. Bruce, who was quoted at the end of the last section, was well rewarded in her examination results for the efforts she made in her studies: at the end of the first year she was awarded two high distinctions and one credit. It was she who asked the question at the beginning of her course: "Do I want to pass exams, or do I want to learn, and what do I want to learn about?"

Asked what led her to apply to the University she had this to say:

> .... When I left school I couldn't have gone to uni. I left school early because I couldn't even finish school.... nothing meant anything. Anything I do now, here, will have some bearing. It will belong somewhere. I've got a reference point. It's not for the sake of passing exams, it's more for the sake of finding out what's to be found out.

The idea that she would like to go to university came to her only gradually over time; she was thinking:

> I'm not getting anywhere, I'd like to know more, [so I asked myself] where do I go and what do I do? And very gradually I came to think that umi. was the way to do it.

She had already made up her mind to work towards gaining her Higher School Certificate when a friend drew her attention to an advertisement for special admission scheme and she applied. Asked if it was important to her to graduate Ms. Bruce said:

> I don't know.... in one way it's very important, but it's a very unreasonable reason. The reason I want to graduate is, you know, I don't like it - it's the sort of "I told you so" type of thing - this isn't the reason I'm here (which is to learn) but it's still the reason I want to graduate.

Ms. Arthur, who at one time had been a nurse, and since had been involved in community work and counselling commented:

> I felt a bit frustrated that I haven't been able to bring about any change that I felt would be beneficial to people.... and I felt, well one way of doing this would be to have a bit more power... and also I have always been very interested in trying to widen the vocational sort of use of nurse's training for people.
>
> The nursing training has changed so little, in my experience, for the last twenty years that something's got to be done.

Ms. Short, who had previously worked as a secretary, was unlike some of her peers in that she had not, she said,:

> .... attempted to come to uni before because I was happily married, content with life. But my husband suddenly died and I had to decide what to do with the rest of my life.
>
> I hope to find out about new things.
>
> I want to get a qualification (Social Work)...[and] add another dimension to my life. [But] career is not the most important [consideration] because I am a good secretary and I can get a good job doing that.

Ms. View who had also worked previously as a secretary, had wanted to come to the university "to have a broader knowledge". Asked what she hoped to get out of the university she said: "I will develop myself, know what I really am and what I know."

Ms. Neil reported, in her first interview that she had not always wanted to come to the university: she left school, completed a secretarial course and then worked as a secretary. She then travelled for a while:

> But I have always tried to study something, because I enjoy it more than anything.. I've done a few courses in psychology [and] I did a three year course in Indonesian which really stimulated me a lot.

It was her husband's influence, to a great extent, she thought, which had led her to the idea of applying for a place at the University: "I decided around October-November that I wanted to go to university. I started enquiring about it [and] then I saw the ad. in one of the Sunday papers."

Ms.Neil said that it was:

> Basically for my own satisfaction that I'm doing the whole university course. I'm very vague about what I want to do when I finish. I haven't got any ready-made ambition to be a teacher or do something straightaway.... It just can't help but contribute something towards me, which I'm very keen for it to do. I just wish it would hurry.

Ms. Mack responded in a similar vein to those women who were looking for a widening scope and opportunity through university study:

> I felt frustrated in the sort of work I could do without a degree. I know there are a lot of jobs that I would have liked to have gone further in, say consumer work, and I couldn't because I didn't have a degree or some sort of further education.
>
> The same with the Rehabilitation Committee on probation. Now I could possibly have gone into something in that, but I couldn't have moved from administrative and secretarial work [because I didn't have a degree].

Asked how important it was for her to graduate she replied:

> Oh, it's pretty important now that I've started it because I want to achieve it. I wouldn't like to be beaten by it now. But it wouldn't be the end of the world to me..... I would enjoy doing the next.... I just think it will improve and open up, you know, much wider worlds'

Ms. Matthew explained in her first interview;

> I decided to come because the opportunity came up. I have always wanted to study at tertiary level [but I] never thought I could because I hadn't matriculated, [I] didn't think I could cope. I was accepted, then I had to make the decision to give up my job and live on little money for four years, that was very difficult. However, now money problems have become insignificant, I have found that I can cope and the actual work has become very important.

Ms. Matthews said that, in general, she wanted ".... to get educated, become a broader person, [a] better citizen,[and] understand society." She said that it was important for her to graduate because, having left nursing, she had "burnt her bridges" and that also, not being young, she needed some security.

To conclude this section let us ask the question: On balance, did these women choose to come to university to improve primarily their job opportunities or to develop primarily their own intellect and widen the area of their understanding or to do both? In a questionnaire which was given to all of these students at the beginning of their courses they were asked "Would you indicate what you consider you seek to attain by attending the University?" Of the fifteen who answered this question, seven of the women said that they thought that the most important function of the university was "to develop intellectual abilities and analytical powers more fully"; four thought that the most important function was "to develop a broad general outlook and familiarity with a variety of subjects"; and four stated that the main purpose was "to acquire the qualifications appropriate to a particular occupation". Thus, a majority of eleven women favoured a non-instrumental view of university education.

However, this evidence conflicts with the conclusion drawn by Ms. Maggie Prill, herself a mature age student, who, as part of her course work in sociology, conducted an enquiry into the motivation of twenty of her fellow students who were in their second year of studies. Her finding was that out of her sample of twenty students, sixteen stated that their aim in persisting at the university was to get a job:

> Having found that sixteen of the twenty respondents persevered at university in order to get a degree and thereby a job, I had a look at the four respondents who did not see a job as the fulfillment of their aspirations, and therefore were not persisting for that reason. Three of these women were married to men who could be described as very comfortably off and therefore had no financial need to work - all three had at least three children - two were over forty, and the fourth a single respondent who did not see a job as an important goal remarked that she had private means and did not need to work. All four gave self-actualisation as one of their reasons for persevering. However it is just as important for women with partners to find a job, as it is for women without partners. Of the eight women with partners whose goal is a job, most if not all, have husbands in the upper income bracket. This indicates that financial reward is not the consideration, but the job itself.[7]

Despite this finding, it seems that the group of women on whom I am focussing were interested, at least in their first year at university, in education in its broadest sense rather than just as an instrument to provide them with more attractive opportunities in the labour market. It is not easy however to disentangle these two aspects of education.

In his preface to Hopper and Osborn's book Ralf Dahrendorf makes this interesting observation.

> The new adult student would not be correctly characterised by being either an adult or a student, but by having incorporated education in a social construction of human life which supersedes the traditional notions of the social division of labour.[8]

I will return briefly to these wider issues in the conclusion of this paper; let it suffice, at this stage, to say that in general this group of women chose to come to the university in order to broaden their experience both in terms of increasing their knowledge and of training their minds, and in terms of widening the opportunities open to them for more interesting and responsible jobs. Of the eighteen women in the group, eight mentioned that they had wanted to go to university for a long time, but previously they had been denied the opportunity; five suggested, at least by implication, that it had not been considered as a priority for them as women to further their education. Six of the women reported that they had previously been involved in part-time academic courses. As a group they had earlier displayed a zeal for learning and self-improvement which was evidenced by the single-mindedness with which, as university students, they set about organising their lives to allow a conscientious attention to study requirements.

If these womens' expectations were that through the university studies they would improve their minds, gain a deeper knowledge, and increase their capacity for winning worthwhile jobs, how well were these expectations sustained in the face of their actual experience at the university?

SECTION IV: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

The last two questions to be answered are:

"Were any criticisms made by the women of the functioning of the University, and in particular, of the parts played by the staff, and of the forms of assessment carried out by the different Departments?" and "At the end of the first year were there any expressions of disappointment with the University in general and with their own courses?"

There are about 18,000 students at the University of N.S.W., and Ms. Price, who is by no means a retiring woman, had this to say about the University in one of her gloomier moods:

> [It is] so impersonal and large, and points of contacts are so ephemeral - the structure of the University is very much separate from the University itself - it's like - there aren't too many

> life buoys. [It's] not just me - I met a third-year student the other day who told me how lonely she was, because she is not one of those outgoing people so she can't rush up and talk to people, and apparently if you can't rush up and talk to people nobody's going to take the time out to talk to you.

Ms. Price noted, midway in her first year, that she was "getting isolated" since she had no time to attend any functions at the University. She complained of the inefficiency of the University and of the apparent casualessness of the staff: one staff member, she said, had kept her waiting for three quarters of an hour: "Nothing matters much here. I get the feeling that the University is not really all that geared to students."

Several of the women complained that they did not get enough feed-back in the assessment of their essays: they were not able to tell where they had been at fault so that they might make corrections in their subsequent essays. Ms. Price complained too that the students were not told when their marked essays would be returned:

> Word filters through they will be back and then they are not - then you go back the next day.... and they're not there, and finally, on the third day, if you're lucky they are [there] but then only three quarters of them.

Examinations, in Ms. Price's opinion, were "silly", and assessment of essays, she said, appeared to be "very uneven" and "very much at the whim of whoever it is who is going to mark the paper". She was disappointed at the seeming arbitariness of assessment: one young student was given seventeen out of twenty for a paper on a book she had not read, and Ms. Price had been told by other students that to get through you have "got to learn to beat the system."

Several of the women expressed the difficulty they had initially in knowing what was expected of them. As they felt that they were operating i the dark they were dependent on the comments given by the staff on their essays to indicate to them whether or not they were proceeding along the right lines.

Ms. View pointed out, humourously:

> I've been waiting for my first sociology essay mark back since last Wednesday. I go three times a day to see if the marks are in. I said to the secretary the other day I felt like an expectant father, all I needed was a cigar, I was pacing the corridor waiting to see if the marks had come in.

She went on to say that she still did not have a clear idea of what was needed:

> I don't like the mark's rat race that I feel I've embarked on, but it's the only way of gauging you know progress on your ability at present. I don't know just what is expected so I've got to wait for a mark to see if that is what they meant.

Ms. Neil made a similar point during her first interview:

> I'm so rapt in the whole idea of it anyway that I'm really determined to make a go of it. I think the only thing that would get me down is....you see at the moment, I'm not getting any feedback as to how I'm going and I find that a bit frustrating. At the moment I haven't got any idea of how I'm going and that really bugs me.... And I don't find it all that easy to go and chat to tutors about it, because I mean tutorials are usually fairly big anyway and you don't get any close, interpersonal relationships. But once I start having a few exam papers and things marked, essays marked, it will help me a lot more.

Ms. Brown expressed some surprise at the marks system:

> Everything is rather mark orientated - it's all working to marks. I don't know how I thought they arrived at your progress but I didn't realise that it was all very tightly on marks. And the marks of perhaps one or two differ between people - [there's a] a good bit of competition just to get that extra mark.... I don't know whether it's a good thing... Of course there wouldn't have to be competition unless everyone wanted to prove that they were equal or better.

Ms. South expressed some anxiety about her work during her second interview:

> I am getting no feedback from staff about how I am going. My sociology essay just came back with a series of ticks in the column and a mark at the end, so that was absolutely no help to me, I was wondering why I lost the marks that I did and what I could do to improve.....I think the fact that they don't give more feedback on essays is pretty disgusting. Obviously you have put a lot of work into it [and] they could at least put good or bad or something. You get the impression that you are one out of 200 that they had to mark, and that they were bored or tired or both and that they just couldn't bother.

Ms. Macintyre, who had previously attended several W.E.A. courses, complained about the strictures of university study:

> [they] just want this, this, this and this. They don't want anymore or any less. You know, just this. Straightforward. There's no wanting you to be creative or anything like that.

Asked if she had been chastised for having a more creative approach Ms. Macintyre replied: "Yes. No...they just want to....well, they can't mark it then you see, because it's not on their sheet." She added that the methods of assessment:

> ...just sort of wipe out any feeling that you have that you want to do anymore. You know, okay, if thats what they want, that's all. I'll do that. No more, no less. That's it.

Another difficulty which Ms. Macintyre mentioned was that communication between the staff and their students was often unclear and inadequate: "They never say anything definite to you - just round and round sort of thing." Nevertheless, she felt that the University was "about what I expected." Asked if she was aware of playing the system, she replied:

> Oh yes, you have to or you don't get what you want...That's life - play the systems wherever you go....If you want something you've got to do what other people want you to do. Or follow the channel that's going to get you there. Whether you like it or not. If you want to achieve something you've got to do it that way.

Speaking of her dislike of examinations she said: "Exams are not for the pupil to learn anything from....[they are] just a relevant test to see if you can remember something that you've learnt two days before. Asked if there had been a chance to discuss her examination papers with her tutors, she retorted: "No, No! Good Heavens no, that's taboo. You never know what you've got or what you've done wrong." Several of the women expressed their dread of examinations and Ms. Macintyre said that as it was her first examination for so long she was: "Just so nervous....it's incredible. I was just a pack of nerves when I walked into the room." She echoed the opinion of the majority of the women interviewed in her stated preference for continuous assessment.

Like Ms. Price, the last respondent quoted, Ms. Macintyre was critical of what she saw as the slackness of some of the staff; and some of her tutors, she said, were far too young and inexperienced: 'It's wrong they're just not capable of handling a class."

In general, although she was glad that she had taken up the opportunity to come to the University Ms. Macintyre felt some disappointment: "The whole situation.... exams and that, [we're] not here to learn but to pass exams." And this mood prevailed through to her final year when, in conversation, Ms. Macintyre admitted: "I'm very cynical about it [the University]. I don't think people learn that much at the university.... [they] just learn headings so to speak."

She also noted that the students tended to be highly competitive with each other, and for that reason there was not much sharing of ideas. Speaking generally of the student body, Ms. Macintyre claimed that there was considerable demoralisation amongst the students resulting from the fact that many of them would find it difficult to obtain reasonable jobs once they had graduated. She herself had no fixed plans as to what she might do once she had graduated.

Amonst this group of women it was Ms. Price and Ms. Macintyre who were most disgruntled at the workings of the University. Both had led full working lives before they had enrolled whereas those of the women who experienced their new status as a university student as a reprieve from a confined existence, were less critical. Ms. Johns, who had "always regretted not studying" could only say: "I like everything about the University". And Ms. Adam, who declared at the time of her first interview "I am so thrilled to have got here" had no complaints to make. She did admit, however, that after the first examinations: "I really was a wreck".

Ms. Lewis, who had previously worked as a housewife and mother of four sons, and who now combined these tasks with that of a student, said that she thoroughly enjoyed all her subjects and that they were all "terribly interesting". She said that she felt "like a queen" in her new life and that she had not been disappointed in her expectations of the University: "[I have] a very limited view of university - [as a] place where one comes to study and work quite seriously towards certain goals". The whole experience for her was:

> ...thoroughly rewarding and pleasant, [and it's becoming] even more pleasant because it's a familiar place now..... it's lost it's newness, it's lost it's mystery a bit. I know where to go and to whom to talk if I need anything.

Several of the women did complain that the amount that they were expected to do did not give them enough time to explore in as much depth as they would have liked.

Ms. Brown mentioned that she found it hard to maintain her own standards in the face of the amount of facts that she felt required to regurgitate. She was amongst those women, who, towards the middle of their first year, admitted that their original idealistic view of the University had crumbled. She stated her opinion of the University as follows: "It is a bit oppressive. [There is] no chance to air grievances against the system or to influence things."

Ms. Bruce was concerned too that the amount that she was required to cover made it difficult to gain more than a superficial knowledge:

> If I go at the pace I'm going now I feel as though I could probably scrape through. I seem to be keeping up more or less reasonably well. I'd like to be able to put a lot more into it, because I feel that a lot of knowledge I've got now, from what I'm supposed to have learnt, is very superficial.

like several other members of one group she wondered how worthwhile most of the lectures were:

> I feel that in a way I'd like to be able to avoid a lecture, but still know what happened in a lecture, so that I know what to work from. I have a feeling that they're not [worth going to]. I've found that when I've worked on a lecture.... and then gone to it, everything in the lecture has been covered. However, the lecture does consolidate it into some sort of meaningful compact thing.

Ms. Arthur also spoke of the lectures:

> I've had some grouches about lectures like everyone else - Oh, you know, size of lectures and being talked at is not my cup of tea - [some of the lectures] are a complete waste of time.

Ms. View, like Ms. Bruce, was conscious of a certain superficiality in the work she was required to do:

> [I am] a little disappointed because it didn't live up to what I had imagined over the years a university was going to be like.... I thought that you could acquire more knowledge - you didn't have to specialise as much. I didn't realise you would have to spend so much time on preparation of each thing that you couldn't delve into other things a bit more deeply.

Ms. Johns also experienced a demystification of her idea of a university:

> ...[my idea has changed] from the rather idealised picture (great centre of learning, freedom of learning, questing spirit, etc.) to a more down-to-earth one. I now work

much more strictly to the set course structure, and [I'm] a little disappointed that the educational ideals are so hum-drum here.

Ms. Neil commented in similar vein that she had previously in her mind placed the university "on a bit of a pedestal" but that it had come down a lot in her estimation:

I used to keep it on a bit of a pedestal, but now I think I do that a lot less - so it's come down in my estimation a lot. It's such a status thing to go to university and it seems to me now to be just so wrong to have it that way... I don't think that people who have a B.A. degree are really all that great. It probably is good because it widens your field in a lot of things and that's basically why I wanted to do it, because I haven't got any mad desire to go into any career, it's really just to satisfy myself that I could do it and get a general outline of things.

She commented too on the fact that everything was "based on grades and competitiveness", although she herself could see no way of overcoming this limitation:

You just can't get away from it. It's really bad though. It would be nice to be able to help one another but it just doesn't happen. But it's just the way you're brought up to accept that and very few people ever question it, I think it's a very bad thing but I accept it because I can't see any way out of it....I'm not prepared to buck the system just to prove a point and probably no-one else is either, and everyone goes along with it and that's how it continues.

Ms. Mack, who had previously worked as a secretary, had this to say:

I always had in the back of my mind that I would like to do something like this. I envied people doing it. I thought it was much more difficult: the rest of the world isn't as clever as I thought it was.

She was not, however, disappointed with the University:

It's been absolutely beyond my wildest dreams that it could work out like this and it's been exciting and I'm very grateful that I have been given this opportunity.

She did though, express some surprise at the rigours of the assessment procedures:

When I first came I didn't know [that] there were these fine lines - I just thought there was pass and fail. It comes as a shock this chasing marks. I can't judge my own work - I just don't know how they mark.

Ms. Short commented on the amount of material that had to be covered:

> Yes, I'm glad that I came. I'm finding it a bit fast, I have the feeling that I might like to slow down and get some more from what I am doing. Maybe it is just me and I am not fast enough to keep up.

Ms. Arthur's opinion too was: "The amount of work required to do adequately is prohibitive in terms of obtaining self-awareness....I have no time to do what I conceive of as 'higher learning'".

A somewhat similar point was made by Ms. Short: "Uni. demands too much course work. [They] should allow students to delve deeper into subjects, read more, go more slowly, get interested in peripheral subjects."

Ms. South expressed her overall enthusiasm for her new life:

> I am still happy that I came. I think you get as much out of it as you want to. My one complaint is that you tend to race through things. It's very hard to imagine what it was like before I was here. I feel that I have been here so long. I have learnt an incredible lot.

Asked if her previous perception of a university had in any way changed, she replied:

> [I] expected that the uni. would have had some overall philosophy - [with] more interaction between departments and more uniformity of standards. But [I] was surprised to discover that each School was independent of the others in attitude and methods.

Ms. Brown, who had previously worked as a secretary, observed:

> I'm very highly motivated...I'm interested in what we're doing just for the intrinsic value rather than interested in simply getting my degree and that's it. I'd love to go right into everything. I find it very hard to just sort of stop there. I'm aware of that temptation but I haven't done that at all so far - I just haven't had time. I'm surprised by how superficial it is.

Ms. Arthur, who was quoted earlier saying that the amount of work set gave the student little time in which to develop more self-awareness, spoke of a test she had just completed: "[It's] the sort where you write as much as you can in the hour. Seems like a funny sort of exercise but it must mean something." Speaking in general, at the end of her first year, about her perceptions of the University, she said:

> I didn't expect it to be so superficial - I didnt' expect to have to learn to play the system to survive and to determine what it was that was expected by staff. [I] didn't expect to miss working but [I] miss the contacts I made when working. I feel next year I may have to find a job - say half a day to keep me in touch. University is rather divorced from the real world

To conclude this final section, then, several of the women did express some disappointment in the University: one respondent admitted, for example, that her perceptions of a university had changed and that previously she had placed such institutions of higher learning on "a bit of a pedestal". Other women complained that the structure of the courses did not allow for creative work on the part of the students; and the forms of assessment, especially in the case of examinations, inhibited a creative approach to learning. Several women were clearly bemused at the outset of their studies as to what was expected of them, and they were surprised to find themselves "chasing marks". It was realised, by one or two, that to succeed it was necessary to "play the system" and that this involved a compromise in their approach to learning.

In general, this group of women had been active before they came to the University in furthering their education by reading widely and by attending different part-time courses. One or two of them bemoaned the fact that now they were at the University their general education was being neglected. No longer did they have the time to pursue their own particular interests. As one respondent put it.

> I'm less enchanted by this system of learning, or any system of learning. [I'm] thinking that having got this far and I'll go further then I will be much more self-disciplined to go out and do it another way - like reading without having to do it with any external pressure like exams.

However, the limitations which were imposed by the need to concentrate their minds on specific tasks, were compensated for by the discipline they felt they were getting as a result of having to channel their interests. Perhaps those women who had felt most confined in their previous lives were more likely, in their gratitude, to have rather a deferential attitude to the University and its teachers.

As their initial enthusiasm was tempered by the actual experience of becoming students in a large institution, some of the women showed signs of feeling alienated within the University. I have said nothing so far in this paper about the women amongst the group who have not, for one reason or

another, continued with their university programme. In fact, out of this group of eighteen three have dropped out for "family reasons". Two of these women, Ms. Dawson and Ms. Nigel, found they they could not manage to sustain the effort required to continue with their studies and, at the same time, give adequate time to their children. Another, Ms. Neil, has left because her husband has taken a job overseas.

If the women did have feelings of alienation it was not sufficient to deter them, it seems, in their resolve to make the most of the opportunity which they had been given.

It is interesting to note the way in which, for some of them, the idea of the university was demystified as a result of their actual experience. No longer did these women perceive an insuperable barrier between those who have a degree, and who are therefore in some sense 'educated', and themselves. If previously these women shared the sense of low self-esteem which is so often attributed to the female sex, then, for them to have realised that gaining a degree was well within their reach may well have constituted a significant psychological break-through.

If their initial expectations of the university - that through their studies they would improve their minds, gain a deeper knowledge, and increase their capacity for obtaining worthwhile jobs - were, at least partially, confounded by their actual experience, that is not to say that any one of them expressed any regret at all at their decision to take up the challenge that was offered to them.

CONCLUSION

In a chapter on Women and Education, Hopper and Osborn have this to say:

> And if, according to the logic of selection through the stratification and education systems, those who become adult students are likely to be drawn from the system's pool of previous 'selection errors', then those females who surmount such overwhelming obstacles in order to become adult students must be the most erroneous 'selection errors' of all. Although notion of 'waste' is problematic, it is reasonable to assume that when a person who is sufficiently talented to benefit from selective, further and higher education enters manual and clerical jobs, whatever the inadequacies of the educational programme and whatever the gratification from such jobs, in the long run, this constitutes a personal and social waste. By any of the

> conventional standards now employed for the purposes of selection, and especially when the effects of initial social class positions are considered together with those of sex, the waste of talented females is so much greater than for males, which is any case of serious propositions, that it can only be described a colossal.[9]

If education is to be regarded both as a civil right and also as a means by which society taps its human resources then there is no question that the opportunity that was given to the group of forty-eight women to come to the University in 1975, despite the fact that they had not matriculated, is one which should be granted on a larger scale and by more institutions of higher learning. When women do not have an equal opportunity to attend university then this inequality constitutes both a personal and a social deprivation. However, the present provision for mature age unmatriculated women to continue their formal education is still minimal: and it seems most likely, as Hopper and Osborn point out, that those who presented themselves for this opportunity are the women who have felt the restrictions of their lack of formal education most acutely. If the goal is to provide a greater equality of opportunity in education then a more determined effort must be made to draw not just from the population of women but also from both the male and female working class population to whom the privilege of attending an institution of higher learning seems even more remote. We need to explore ways in which such opportunities, if they are made available, can be communicated throughout all the strata of society. That in itself, of course, is hardly sufficient, for the problems of inequality derive from structural sources which universities alone cannot combat.

The fact that the Professorial Board in 1974 agreed to allow an intake into the University that was predominantly made up of unmatriculated women constitutes a reform. But if there is any shared belief in the importance of bringing about more equality of opportunity in our society then I am doubtful if such reforms standing alone, are an adequate expression of that belief. For those women who were admitted under this scheme were by no means drawn from a deprived group, except insofar as they were women.

A further point is that if more and more graduates in the future will be unable to find jobs commensurate with their skills, then it is no longer functional for the universities to regard themselves as part of the 'cooling out' process to legitimate stratification in our society along the lines of

differential status and financial reward which accrues from heirarchical levels of employment. It is becoming more and more necessary for university education to be seen in a broader sense as "education for life" rather than as a vocational training ground. It may be that we will have to alter our perceptions of what constitutes "work" and what constitutes "leisure". There is a trend, at least among the more privileged youth, to formulate their own projects which they regard as their "work" whether or not these personal interests coincide with the specific content of their jobs. And this constitutes a challenge to the universities: is the structure and design of university courses, including, most importantly, the procedures adopted for assessment, best suited to the wider aims of education which are to develop and at the same time to tap each individual's creative resources? The women who have been depicted in this report were interested not only in widening their opportunities for finding meaningful and worthwhile jobs, but also in training their minds and in increasing their knowledge as part of a general project for self-improvement.

It is my opinion that such projects for self-improvement are in danger of becoming privatised retreats from the world unless each individual conscientiously sees the political context of their own position. The point of education is not just that it should enable us to understand the world better but also that it should enable us to contribute positively towards changing it for the better. We live in a world of scarce resources, and this gives those who are privileged special responsibilities. Several of the women said (some rather vaguely) that they hoped to do something useful in the community once they had graduated. However, although one or two of them expressed their gratitude to the Women's Collective for taking the initiative which enabled them to come to the University, I hope that it is not unfair if I point out that few of them fully appreciated the implications of their position: their lives had been changed and presumably enlarged in scope as a result of a specific political action taken, on their behalf, by a group of active feminists.

The points that I have raised in this brief conclusion - that more effort is needed to consider ways of opening up the opportunity for university education to less privileged groups in society; that the present structure of some of the courses and the modes of assessment may not be suited to the needs of many of today's students; and that those who are given access to the scarce resource of higher education have responsibilities not only to themselves but, to balance their privilege, to the community at large -

are far-reaching indeed, but if educational research is to have any value it is important, it seems to me, to keep them in mind. The group of mature age students on whom this report has been based provide an interesting focus from which to explore these issues: they are a marginal or dissenting group in society insofar as they have made a determined effort to break out of what seemed to them, at least in some respects, a confined and limited situation. Whether or not they will continue in this dissent remains to be seen. It is a pleasure to hear these women give witness to the fact that the opportunity that was given to them has opened up "a great big beautiful world"; and this enthusiasm was sustained, at least throughout their first year, despite the fact that their actual experience of the University dispelled for most of them what had been an idealised perception of university education; but let us not forget that this small group and others like it constitute only the tip of the iceberg.

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